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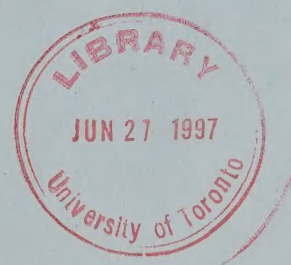
Background Paper

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**BOOT CAMPS: ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION**

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September 1996



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## BOOT CAMPS: ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

### INTRODUCTION

Boot camps, based on a military basic training model stressing discipline and physical conditioning, have been in operation in the United States for over 15 years. In Canada, legislators have only recently begun to consider them as a sentencing option for young offenders. In 1994, Alberta established a strict discipline "work camp" facility for aboriginal young offenders,<sup>(1)</sup> and a "made in Manitoba model" boot camp for young offenders has been set up in that province. At a news conference held at the Ontario Legislature on 29 August 1996, the Solicitor General of Ontario announced his government's intention to establish a "strict discipline" pilot program for 30 to 50 high-risk repeat male young offenders by January 1997.<sup>(2)</sup> An Ontario Task Force on Strict Discipline for Young Offenders, appointed by the Solicitor General and Minister of Correctional Services, recommended a program that would have as its essential features "highly structured 16-hour days, mandatory education, uniforms, life skills training, rigorous physical activity and no idle time." The pilot project is to be divided into two components: offenders will serve four to six months in a secure-custody facility and three to six months under supervision in a community-based open-custody facility. Strict discipline is a key consideration in the proposed program. In explaining the Ontario government's decision to create a boot camp-like facility for violent youth, the province's Solicitor General stated, "Ontario

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(1) John Howard Society of Ontario, "Boot Camps for Young Offenders," *Fact Sheet #8*, August 1996, p. 2.

(2) Canada Newswire, *Task Force Recommends "Strict Discipline" Pilot Project*, Toronto, 29 August 1996.



residents have repeatedly called for tougher sanctions against youths who show a flagrant disregard for the law. This government is committed to delivering a programme that would expose young offenders to the concepts of discipline and personal responsibilities.”<sup>(3)</sup>

What are boot camps intended to achieve? Have they succeeded in meeting their objectives? This paper will consider these questions through a brief discussion of the development of U.S. boot camps and an examination of the findings from evaluation research on their effectiveness.

## BACKGROUND OF U.S. BOOT CAMPS

Boot camps first appeared in the United States as a sentencing option in 1983. There are currently more than 40 such prisons in 29 states.<sup>(4)</sup> They represent one of the sentencing options with “bite” that have been made available to judges in the U.S. over the past two decades. In the U.S. literature on sentencing, boot camps are included in the range of penalties referred to as “intermediate sanctions.” These penal sanctions, also referred to as “community-based prison alternatives,” are intended to be harsher and more restrictive than probation, and less onerous and restrictive than prison.<sup>(5)</sup> Since time in boot camps, by definition, involves detention, albeit in non-conventional prisons and involving significantly shorter sentences, the term “intermediate sentences” appears to be a misnomer. While the lack of conceptual clarity extant in the literature on community-based sanctions will not be resolved in this paper, it has been highlighted because two of the stated objectives of U.S. boot camp prisons are to relieve prison overcrowding and reduce correctional costs.

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(3) L. Wright, “Young Offenders’ Boot Camps Ready Next Fall, Tories Say,” *Toronto Star*, 21 November 1995.

(4) D.G. Parent, “Boot Camps Failing to Achieve Goals,” in M. Tonry and K. Hamilton (eds.), *Intermediate Sanctions in Overcrowded Times*, Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1995, p. 139.

(5) Tonry and. Hamilton (1995).



Widespread development of sanctions such as boot camps in the U.S. during the 1980s and 1990s is associated with three related factors.<sup>(6)</sup> First, in the 1960s and 1970s the efficacy of rehabilitation efforts in preventing recidivism and protecting the public was challenged by those advancing the view that "nothing works"; consequently, "rehabilitation lost credibility as a basis for sentencing."<sup>(7)</sup> Second, the rehabilitative rationale for sentencing was supplanted by "just deserts" concern that punishment should be proportional with the crime. It was held that the severity of the penalty should be scaled to the gravity of the offender's crime and not to the therapeutic needs of individual offenders and the risks they pose. Third, criminal justice issues became politicized. Increasingly, law and order proponents linked public safety to harsher sentences and campaigned on promises to implement the latter. Political pressure for more severe penalties, coupled with the notion that any sanction less than prison does not count, diminished the acceptability of "mere" probation as a sentencing option. Consequently, state and federal correctional populations underwent unprecedented growth, as did the costs of building and maintaining prison facilities. Together

[t]hese developments resulted in a quadrupling in the number of state and federal prisoners between 1975 (240,593) and midyear 1994 (1,012,851) and in substantial overcrowding of American prisons....In 1994 and 1995, corrections budgets were the fastest rising component of state spending.<sup>(8)</sup>

In response, states began to implement boot camp programs to divert offenders from conventional prison. The anticipated effects of the new programs -- to provide tough penalties for criminal law violations while reducing prison overcrowding, costs to taxpayers and recidivism -- explain their appeal as a sentencing option. Indeed, the considerable public support in the U.S. for boot camps continues to grow, in large part because their quasi-military environment, emphasizing strict discipline, hard physical labour, exercise, drill and

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(6) M. Tonry, *Sentencing Matters*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1996, p. 100-101.

(7) *Ibid.*, p. 100.

(8) *Ibid.*, p. 100-101



ceremony, is perceived to be a tough, appropriate punishment for those who have breached the criminal law.<sup>(9)</sup>

## FEATURES OF BOOT CAMPS

U.S. boot camp prisons impose a harsh and demanding regime on offenders. The programs share the features of a minimum-security custodial facility, although the setting is not a standard prison and the time served is relatively short (usually 90 to 180 days). All boot camp prisons are modelled on the military basic training regime but in other important respects they vary considerably.<sup>(10)</sup> Although some U.S. boot camps accept juvenile and female offenders, the typical participant is a male between 17 and 25 years of age. Some U.S. boot camp inmates enter the program through the "back door"; that is, they are selected by correctional officials from a group of offenders sentenced by the court to serve a conventional prison term. Other programs receive inmates through the "front door"; that is, a sentence of a term in boot camp is imposed by the court. U.S. boot camps also differ with respect to the proportion of inmates who are dismissed prior to the completion of the program, whether offenders can elect to be admitted to a boot camp, and whether inmates can freely choose to drop out and serve the rest of their sentence in prison.

Judging from the literature, the most important differences among U.S. boot camps are in the content and duration of daily activities. Programming corresponding to the criminogenic needs of offenders, such as drug treatment, counselling and educational training, is given prominence in some boot camps, whereas in others the emphasis is on work, drill and physical training with minimal or no rehabilitative interventions. Upon an offender's release from a boot camp, the type of after-care or support provided in the community also varies. Some offenders are placed on regular probation, some receive intensive probation supervision, and others are monitored electronically.

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(9) D.L. MacKenzie, *et al.*, "Boot Camp Prisons and Recidivism in Eight States," *Criminology*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 1995, p. 327.

(10) *Ibid.*, p. 328.



How effective are boot camp programs in meeting their objectives of relieving prison overcrowding while reducing correctional costs and the re-offence rate of participants? Since boot camps have only just begun to make an appearance in Canada and no empirical evaluation studies have been conducted to date, the information that follows relies on the results of U.S. research studies.

## EVALUATION RESEARCH ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF BOOT CAMPS

One study examined the re-offence rates of males released from boot camp programs in eight states: Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, New York, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas.<sup>(11)</sup> For the most part, participation in a boot camp program was limited to young males who had committed nonviolent offences and had no prior felony convictions or sentences of incarceration. Their rates of re-offending were compared with those of recidivism in comparison groups -- male prison parolees, probationers, and boot camp drop-outs whose demographic characteristics, criminal history and current offence rendered them legally eligible for participation in boot camps.

Boot camp "graduates" and those in the comparison groups revealed "no significant differences" in their rates of recidivism in four of the states -- Texas, Oklahoma, Florida and South Carolina. In other words, the researchers found no evidence that boot camp prisons had an impact on subsequent re-offending. In the remaining four states, some significant differences were found.

Releasees from the Georgia program actually re-offended at higher rates than their counterparts in the comparison sample. This negative outcome was attributed to the fact that the Georgia boot camp emphasized physical conditioning and military-style discipline and offered minimal interventions to address the treatment needs of offenders.

We suspect that the emphasis on the military basic training without any therapeutic emphasis is a key contributor to this

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(11) *Ibid.*



negative impact, and future research should carefully address this issue.<sup>(12)</sup>

The Illinois, Louisiana, and New York boot camps were found to be more successful. Those who completed the program had lower re-offence rates than the comparison groups on most measures of recidivism. Features of the three programs identified as accounting for this positive outcome included the fact that: three or more hours of rehabilitative efforts were structured into the daily schedule of activities; upon completion of the boot camp program, releasees were intensively supervised and supported in the community; program participants had all been sentenced to a prison term but had volunteered to serve their sentences in the boot camp as opposed to a conventional prison; and the duration of the successful programs (120 to 180 days) was longer than that of other boot camp programs. These findings are consistent with research showing that high quality correctional treatment strategies and intensive after-care are associated with reductions in recidivism, whereas punishment alone is not.<sup>(13)</sup>

Another study evaluated three demonstration boot camp programs for juveniles in Cleveland (Ohio), Denver (Colorado), and Mobile (Alabama).<sup>(14)</sup> Participants in the 90-day programs were males under 18 years of age who had been convicted of nonviolent offences. Daily routines were highly structured, with offenders subjected to military exercises and discipline, hard labour and physical fitness. Programs differed with respect to the availability of rehabilitative interventions such as academic and life skills education, counselling, and substance abuse treatment. The Cleveland program attempted to achieve a balance between the rehabilitative needs of the inmates and the demands of a military regime. It was the only program to emphasize therapeutic strategies and acknowledge the importance of "building healthy, pro-social norms in a safe, comfortable environment that was given order through

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(12) *Ibid.*, p. 352.

(13) *Ibid.*, p. 353.

(14) B.B. Bourque, *et al.*, "Boot Camps for Juvenile Offenders: An Implementation Evaluation of Three Demonstration Programs," *Research in Brief*, National Institute of Justice, May 1996.





military regimentation.”<sup>(15)</sup> Both the Denver and Mobile boot camp prisons emphasized a military-style approach focusing on fostering acceptable behaviour and discouraging deviance. Denver participants received the least educational and life skills programming while those in the Mobile program were offered slightly more. Staff selected to run the Cleveland program had both military and counselling experience, while a military background was the primary qualification sought for staff in Denver and Mobile. Only the Cleveland program was voluntary and all of its participants had been prison-bound. The Mobile program accepted youth who had been unsuccessful on probation, while Denver targeted probationers. Finally, each of the programs was followed by six to nine months of community-based after-care, which in Cleveland and Denver was conducted in centres specifically set up for the purpose. Those released at the end of the Mobile program were directed to local Girls and Boys Clubs where they could take part in after-school and evening activities. In Denver, the focus of after-care was on academic instruction. Rehabilitation programming in Cleveland offered continuity between the boot camp and after-care phases.

During the residential phase, offenders at each of the three boot camp sites showed improvements in their attitudes, behaviour, educational performance, and physical conditioning, with the majority “graduating” from the programs. The positive effects of intensive discipline, control and scrutiny on their behaviour dissipated, however, once these constraints were removed.<sup>(16)</sup> In effect, the imposition of discipline in the daily routine had failed to instil self-discipline in many of the juvenile offenders. At no site did more than half of the participants successfully complete after-care and a significant proportion of youth were arrested for new criminal offences. The after-care failure and re-arrest rates in Denver were 70.5% and 32.8% respectively; in Cleveland, 50% and 33%; and in Mobile, 28.3% and 20.2%. Mobile’s relatively low failure rate is attributed to the fact that program targeted youth with less serious criminal backgrounds than those in the Denver and Cleveland boot camps. In fact, it is suggested that all of the programs may have accepted too many inappropriate offenders.

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(15) *Ibid.*, p. 4.

(16) *Ibid.*, . 7.



Two of the programmes may have included too many serious offenders, while the third camp appeared to have included too many youths for whom less restrictive and cheaper probation sanctions would have been more appropriate.<sup>(17)</sup>

A further study evaluated attitudinal change among boot camp inmates in Harris County, Texas.<sup>(18)</sup> Participants in the 90-day program included convicted offenders (between the ages of 17 and 24 years) under probation supervision. Although the emphasis of the program was on "paramilitary training" (i.e., physical conditioning) participants were provided with some vocational skills training, and alcohol and drug counselling. In the second phase of the program, participants were released into "super-intensive" probation supervision for an additional 90 days. The objective of the research was to evaluate probationers upon their entering and leaving the program and to determine the impact of the boot camp experience on their attitudes to: boot camp staff, the boot camp program, the role of punishment and rehabilitation in the program, and future opportunities; substance abuse counselling; AIDS education/counselling; quality of relations with family and friends; and indicators of self control, impulsiveness, and coping skills.<sup>(19)</sup>

Boot camp participants' responses to questions in these surveys indicated a positive attitudinal change among the probationers who had completed the program. These offenders reported favourable impressions of the boot camp program and of their future opportunities, positive effects of drug and alcohol counselling services, improved relationships with family members, and feelings of greater self-control and less impulsiveness.<sup>(20)</sup> The research did not assess the rates of probationers' completion of the after-care phase of the program or of their criminal behaviour after release.

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(17) *Ibid.*, p. 8.

(18) V.S. Burton, *et al.*, "A Study of Attitudinal Change Among Boot Camp Participants," *Federal Probation*, September 1993.

(19) *Ibid.*, p. 46.

(20) *Ibid.*, p. 51.



## DISCUSSION

The U.S. boot camp programs are intended to reduce the size of the prison population, correctional costs and re-offending rates. In the considered opinion of one researcher, the findings of evaluation research "are sobering."<sup>(21)</sup>

While some studies have shown the attitudes and behaviour of participants while in the boot camp program to be more positive than those of their counterparts serving prison sentences, the recidivism rates of the two groups after their release tend to converge. The few studies showing a lower re-offence rate among boot camp "graduates" than among comparison groups have found an association between reduced recidivism and factors such as rehabilitative programming and better quality of after-care, rather than between recidivism and physical exercise and military discipline.<sup>(22)</sup> One researcher noted:

If a highly regimented atmosphere by itself (with strict rules and discipline, physical training, and hard labor) reduced the recidivism of offenders who completed boot camp, releasees should have lower rates of recidivism than comparable offenders receiving different sentences. This did not happen. Thus, we concluded that the boot camp atmosphere alone does not reduce recidivism, nor does it result in higher recidivism than characterizes those who spend a longer term in prison.<sup>(23)</sup>

Research assessing the impact of boot camps on prison overcrowding has also failed to yield optimistic results. This is in large part a function of the type of offenders who are sentenced to serve time in boot camps. There is mounting evidence that the eligibility criteria built into the design of these programs are often ignored by judges, who tend to use them for low-risk offenders who would not in fact have been sent to prison. Only half of the offenders sentenced to a boot camp are estimated to be diverted from prison; the other half

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(21) Parent (1995), p. 139.

(22) D.L. MacKenzie, "Boot Camps - A National Assessment," in Tonry and Hamilton (1995), p. 152.

(23) *Ibid.*, p. 155.



are diverted from probation.<sup>(24)</sup> This practice is known as “net-widening.” For penalties to be genuine alternatives to confinement and actually effect a reduction in the size of the prison population, they must target offenders who have been sentenced to regular prison terms. One analyst estimates that to save prison space, 80% of boot camp participants would otherwise have had to be destined for prison.<sup>(25)</sup>

As described above, boot camps impose a strict and physically demanding regime on offenders and require them to undergo intensive probation supervision in the community when they leave the program. These requirements, it has been found, are related to a significant number of in-program failures and violations of after-care conditions which result in new prison sentences. Between 30 and 50% of boot camp participants fail to complete their program and the revocation rate for technical violations is higher for boot camp completers in community-based after-care than for similar offenders on ordinary probation. This is because the former are more intensively monitored and therefore more likely to get caught.<sup>(26)</sup>

A significant proportion of those who are re-sentenced to prison were diverted into the boot camp from probation rather than incarceration. This creates new demands for prison space; if the boot camp had not existed, the offenders would probably have received a less restrictive community-based sentence. When the net is widened and carceral sanctions are imposed for program failure and breach of after-care conditions, prison use, crowding and criminal justice costs are augmented rather than diminished.

Boot camps illustrate most vividly of all intermediate sanctions the ways in which net-widening, rigorous enforcement of conditions, and high revocation rates can produce the unintended side effect of increased costs and prison use from programmes intended to reduce both.<sup>(27)</sup>

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(24) Tonry (1996), p. 106.

(25) Parent (1995), p. 142.

(26) Tonry (1996), p. 110.

(27) *Ibid.*, p. 111.



In fact, modest reductions in prison population size and costs have been achieved by vesting correctional staff with the authority to transfer appropriate, incarcerated offenders to boot camp.<sup>(28)</sup> Though curtailing the discretion of judges to sentence offenders to intermediate sanction programs is one way of limiting net-widening, it fails to address the high rates of in-program failure and after-care revocations.

In light of evidence derived over more than a decade, a U.S. researcher with extensive experience in evaluating boot camps has proposed a framework to meet the goal of *reducing prison populations*. It contains the following elements.

- Boot camps should target prison-bound offenders sentenced to relatively lengthy terms of incarceration.
- Participants in boot camps should be selected by correctional officials from incoming prison inmates to reduce the risk of net-widening.
- The boot camp should be able to accommodate a large number of offenders.
- In addition to strict discipline, and rigorously enforced rules and sanctions for breaches, boot camps should include a high quality rehabilitative component to promote pro-social attitudes and behaviour and minimize in-program rates of failure.
- Rule violators who do not jeopardize public safety or the integrity of the program should be disciplined whenever feasible within the boot camp and in the after-care program rather than re-incarcerated.
- After-care should offer intensive support to facilitate re-integration into society and to minimize post-release criminality.<sup>(29)</sup>

*Lowering recidivism rates* is another matter, however. In the few programs where this was achieved, it was attributed to the quality of the boot camp's rehabilitation programming and post-program support, not to its strict, military regime. These findings prompt the following research question: would a non-carceral sanction characterized by

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(28) *Ibid.*, p. 110.

(29) Parent (1995), p. 146-7.



intensive, high quality therapeutic interventions and after-care, without the military basic training component, reduce recidivism more or less than boot camps?<sup>(30)</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Priority social and legal policy issues for legislators include enhancing personal and community safety, reducing the fear that crime inspires, and expanding "non-carceral" sentences to reduce correctional populations and costs. Boot camps, a popular U.S. sanction intended to achieve these policy objectives, are beginning to gain support in Canada, particularly for young offenders. Objective social science research -- the foundation of sound criminal justice policies and programs -- has, however, consistently found that expectations of what these interventions can achieve have been overly ambitious.

In fact, this "strict discipline" sanction in the U.S. has not demonstrably reduced re-offending behaviour or improved the safety of communities. Nor have boot camps succeeded in reducing recourse to conventional prisons. Rather, in a number of jurisdictions the program has contributed to "net-widening," thereby increasing pressure on over-stretched correctional resources. Possible net-widening effects of boot camps do not appear to be an issue in this country since "finding alternatives to incarceration is not one of the driving forces for the development of boot camps in Canada."<sup>(31)</sup>

Reducing re-offence rates is the stated objective of the proposed Ontario program, according to the province's Solicitor General: "It's my belief that a strict discipline facility will help these young people stop re-offending, get back on their feet and turn their lives around."<sup>(32)</sup> Not surprisingly, this initiative has met with mixed responses. Its supporters applaud the "get tough" posture adopted by the government. Its critics decry the establishment of a strict discipline facility in light of the research showing that prisons in

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(30) MacKenzie *et al.* (1995) p. 354.

(31) John Howard Society of Ontario (1996), p. 2.

(32) M. Mittelstaedt, "Violent Offenders Will Be Sent to Boot Camp," *Globe & Mail* (Toronto), 30 August 1996.

general, and boot camps in particular, do not significantly reduce crime levels. One opposition Liberal Party member in the provincial legislature has described the proposed program as “a knee-jerk reaction to that hot button issue out there that all these kids need is a quick kick in the butt and all our problems will be over.”<sup>(33)</sup>

It is the Ontario government's intention to evaluate the impact of the “strict discipline” program on recidivism rates after it has been operating for 6, 12 and 18 months. Assuming the evaluation research includes a control group to allow for a comparison between the effectiveness of the program and that of other sentences of the youth court, this should yield an objective measure of the short-term rehabilitative effects of the Ontario “strict discipline” initiative on the attitudes and behaviour of anti-social, violent young offenders.

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(33) Southam News, “Kinder, Gentler Boot Camp Planned,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 30 August 1996.















